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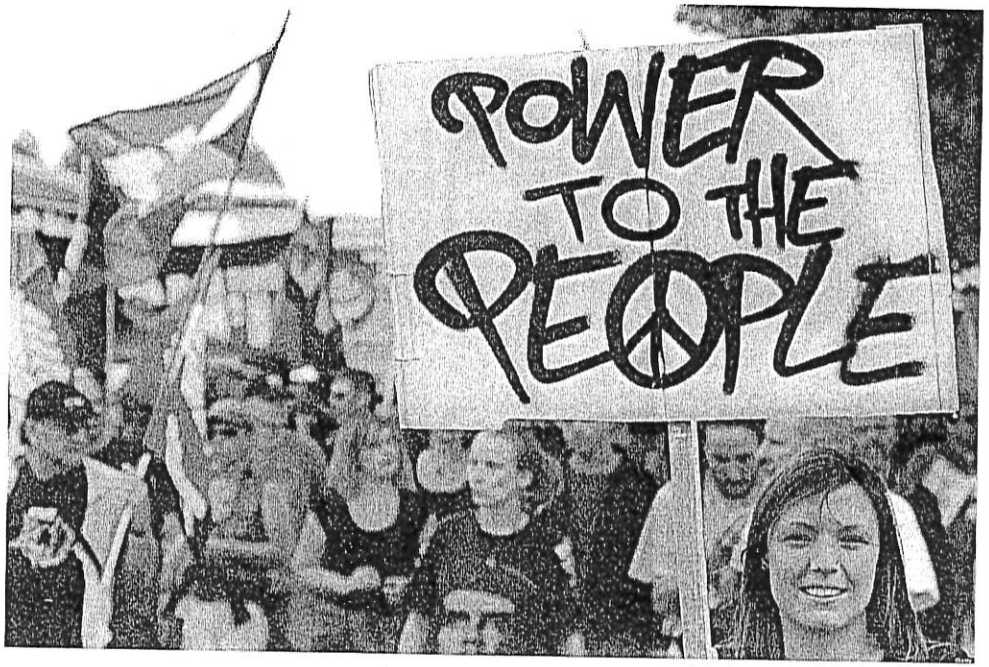
The Nature of Mass Demonstrations



By: John Berger

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On 6 May 1898 there was a massive demonstration of workers, men and women, in the centre of Milan. The events which led up to it involve too long a history to treat with here. The demonstration was attacked and broken up by the army under the command of General Beccaris. At noon the cavalry charged the crowd: the unarmed workers tried to make barricades: martial law was declared and for three days the army fought against the unarmed.

The official casualty figures were 100 workers killed and 450 wounded. One policeman was killed accidentally by a soldier. There were no army casualties. (Two years later Umberto I was assassinated because after the massacre he publicly congratulated General Beccaris, the 'butcher of Milan.')

I have been trying to understand certain aspects of the demonstration in the Corso Venezia on 6 May because of a story I am writing. In the process I came to a few conclusions about demonstrations which may perhaps be more widely applicable.

Mass demonstrations should be distinguished from riots or revolutionary uprisings although, under certain (now rare) circumstances, they may develop into either of the latter. The aims of a riot are usually immediate (the immediacy matching the desperation they express): the seizing of food, the release of prisoners, the destruction of property. The aims of a revolutionary uprising are long-term and comprehensive: they culminate in the taking over of State power. The aims of a demonstration, however, are symbolic: it *demonstrates* a force that is scarcely used.

A large number of people assemble together in an obvious and already announced public place. They are more or less unarmed. (On 6 May 1898, entirely unarmed.) They present themselves as a target to the forces of repression serving the State authority against whose policies they are protesting.

Theoretically demonstrations are meant to reveal the strength of popular opinion or feeling: theoretically they are an appeal to the democratic conscience of the State. But this presupposes a conscience which is very unlikely to exist.

If the State authority is open to democratic influence, the demonstration will hardly be necessary; if it is not, it is unlikely to be influenced by an empty show of force containing no real threat. (A demonstration in support of an already established *alternative* State authority – as when Garibaldi entered Naples in 1860 – is a special case and may be immediately effective.)

Either authority must abdicate and allow the crowd to do as it wishes: in which case the symbolic suddenly becomes real, and, even if the crowd's lack of organisation and preparedness prevents it from consolidating its victory, the event demonstrates the weakness of authority. Or else authority must constrain and disperse the crowd with violence: in which case the undemocratic character of such authority is publicly displayed. The imposed dilemma is between displayed weakness and displayed authoritarianism. (The officially approved and controlled demonstration does not impose the same dilemma: its symbolism is censored: which is why I term it a mere public spectacle.) Almost invariably, authority chooses to use force. The extent of its violence depends upon many factors, but scarcely ever upon the scale of the physical threat offered by the demonstrators. This threat is essentially symbolic. But by attacking the demonstration authority ensures that the symbolic event becomes an historical one: an event to be remembered, to be learnt from, to be avenged.

It is in the nature of a demonstration to provoke violence upon itself. Its provocation may also be violent. But in the end it is bound to suffer more than it inflicts. This is a tactical truth and an historical one. The historical role of demonstrations is to show the injustice, cruelty, irrationality of the existing State authority. Demonstrations are protests of innocence.

But the innocence is of two kinds, which can only be treated as though they were one at a symbolic level. For the purposes of political analysis and the planning of revolutionary action, they must be separated. There is an innocence to be defended and an innocence which must finally be lost: an innocence which derives from justice, and an innocence which is the consequence of a lack of experience.

Demonstrations express political ambitions before the political means necessary to realise them have been created. Demonstrations predict the realisation of their own ambitions and thus may contribute to that realisation, but they cannot themselves achieve them.
The question which revolutionaries must decide in any given historical situation is whether or not further symbolic rehearsals are necessary. The next stage is training in tactics and strategy for the performance itself.

Radical cultural critic, author of the acclaimed Ways of Seeing and the novel G, (winner of the Booker Prize in 1972), John Berger passed away on Jan. 2, 2017 at age 90

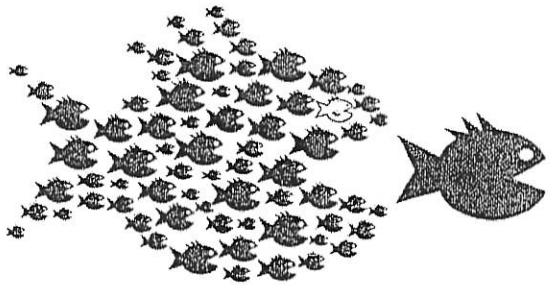
Revolutionary awareness is rehearsed in another way by the choice and effect of location. Demonstrations are essentially urban in character, and they are usually planned to take place as near as possible to some symbolic centre, either civic or national. Their 'targets' are seldom the strategic ones – railway stations, barracks, radio stations, airports. A mass demonstration can be interpreted as the symbolic capturing of a city or capital. Again, the symbolism or metaphor is for the benefit of the participants.

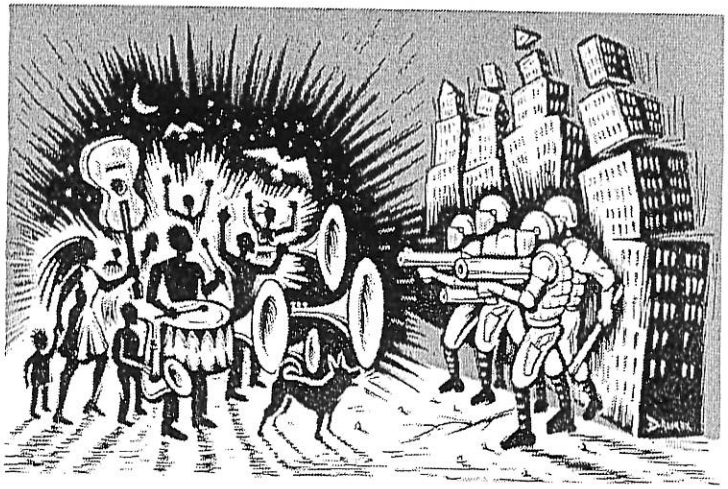
The demonstration, an irregular event created by the demonstrators, nevertheless takes place near the city centre, intended for very different uses. The demonstrators interrupt the regular life of the streets they march through or of the open spaces they fill. They 'cut off these areas, and, not yet having the power to occupy them permanently, they transform them into a temporary stage on which they dramatise the power they still lack.

The demonstrators' view of the city surrounding their stage also changes. By demonstrating, they manifest a greater freedom and independence – a greater creativity, even although the product is only symbolic – than they can ever achieve individually or collectively when pursuing their regular lives. In their regular pursuits they only modify circumstances; by demonstrating they symbolically oppose their very existence to circumstances.

This creativity may be desperate in origin, and the price to be paid for it high, but it temporarily changes their outlook. They become corporately aware that it is they or those whom they represent who have built the city and who maintain it. They see it through different eyes. They see it as their product, confirming their potential instead of reducing it.

Finally, there is another way in which revolutionary awareness is rehearsed. The demonstrators present themselves as a target to the so-called forces of law and order. Yet the larger the target they present, the stronger they feel. This cannot be explained by the banal principle of 'strength in numbers,' any more than by vulgar theories of crowd psychology. The contradiction between their actual vulnerability and their sense of invincibility corresponds to the dilemma which they force upon the State authority.





Demonstrations took place before the principle of democracy was even nominally admitted. The massive early Chartist demonstrations were part of the struggle to obtain such an admission. The crowds who gathered to present their petition to the Tsar in St Petersburg in 1905 were appealing – and presenting themselves as a target – to the ruthless power of an absolute monarchy. In the event – as on so many hundreds of other occasions all over Europe – they were shot down.

It would seem that the true function of demonstrations is not to convince the existing State authority to any significant degree. Such an aim is only a convenient rationalisation.

The truth is that mass demonstrations are rehearsals for revolution: not strategic or even tactical ones, but rehearsals of revolutionary awareness. The delay between the rehearsals and the real performance may be very long: their quality – the intensity of rehearsed awareness – may, on different occasions, vary considerably: but any demonstration which lacks this element of rehearsal is better described as an officially encouraged public spectacle.

A demonstration, however much spontaneity it may contain, is a *created* event which arbitrarily separates itself from ordinary life. Its value is the result of its artificiality, for therein lies its prophetic, rehearsing possibilities.

A mass demonstration distinguishes itself from other mass crowds because it congregates in public *to create its function*, instead of forming in response to one: in this, it differs from any assembly of workers within their place of work – even when strike action is involved – or from any crowd of spectators. It is an assembly which challenges what is given by the mere fact of its coming together.

State authorities usually lie about the number of demonstrators involved. The lie, however, makes little difference. (It would only make a significant difference if demonstrations really were an appeal to the democratic conscience of the State.) The importance of the numbers involved is to be found in the direct experience of those taking part in or sympathetically witnessing the demonstration. For them the numbers cease to be numbers and become the evidence of their senses, the conclusions of their imagination. The larger the demonstration, the more powerful and immediate (visible, audible, tangible) a metaphor it becomes for their total collective strength.

I say metaphor because the strength thus grasped transcends the potential strength of those present, and certainly their actual strength as deployed in a demonstration. The more people there are there, the more forcibly they represent to each other and to themselves those who are absent. In this way a mass demonstration simultaneously *extends* and *gives body* to an abstraction. Those who take part become more positively aware of how they belong to a class. Belonging to that class ceases to imply a common fate, and implies a common opportunity. They begin to recognise that the function of their class need no longer be limited: that it, too, like the demonstrations itself, can create its own function.